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Do We Have To Destroy Ukraine In Order To Save It?

By Vladimir Golstein

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Ukraine is sinking deeper and deeper into the hole that it began to dig for itself since the last year. The process continues to be cheered if not facilitated by western powers, who while calculating the mutual benefits of "Kiev's spring," have failed to acknowledge that such a drastic reorientation comes with the price tag attached. Or maybe these western backers never worried about the price of Kiev's "homecoming." In Chomsky's famous formulation, they were ready to privatize the profits and socialize expenses; at least, that's what they have been doing so far: it is Ukrainians and Russians who are being killed, turned into refugees, lose their property, engage in civil war, and surrender to hatred, intolerance, and bigotry.

But who can blame the Western supporters of the Ukrainian revolution for their failure to contemplate those price tags. The profits were so tempting, so glittering, so within the reach, that any voice of reason or caution had to be silenced. On material level, there was a new market, great soil, possibility of gas-fracking, geopolitical location, Black Sea; the list can go on, of course. There were also plenty of alluring goals on the cultural and political level: the march of the liberal democracy for neoliberals, and the chance to weaken Russia and humiliate Putin – for neocons. How can one resist all that? The neocon establishment of Washington could have overlooked financial profits (they are ideologues, after all, as opposed to plain old conservatives) but they could not resist putting Putin in his place. How dares this KGB upstart, the leader of the country "which doesn't make anything," – as president Obama put it rather unceremoniously in

his interview to the usually proper *Economist* – to interfere in Syria, harbor Snowden and thumb his nose at the West?

The process of bringing Ukraine back into its European fold started very smoothly indeed, despite the fact that this move was based on two innocent white lies. Not even lies. Just half-truths. That Ukraine is the country which is ready to embrace democracy and western type of the government. And that Russia, weakened by its corrupt and greedy leaders would stay out of the conflict. So let the former KGB apparatchiks spend their misguided efforts on impressing the world with expensive Olympics, or harassing their gays, or arresting their protesters, while we pull Ukraine into brave new world of liberal democracy. Russians would not even notice that. I am sure obedient clerks in State Department and CIA have confirmed to their politically motivated leaders that these conclusions are correct. Opposite conclusions could have been supported by equally abundant data, but who wants to say what your boss doesn't want to hear. Skeptical Europeans, who probably should have known better, were also silenced into believing that the "liberation of Ukraine" from the yoke of Moscovy is a worthy goal.

Furthermore, there was a strong conviction, never challenged by the Western press reporting, as they were, from Kiev or other European capitals, that Ukrainians are willing to die to see this accomplished. How could this obvious win-win situation go wrong? The answer, of course, lies in both geography and history. Russia was too close to Ukraine and Russia was inside it. Plagued by its explosive combination of pro- and anti-Russian sentiments, Ukraine is literally a schizophrenic country. It might neighbor Poland, but it surely, "ain't Poland," a country more or less unified by its Catholic faith, political anger at Communism, national anger at Russians, and economic aspirations for the market economy. So pretty much everything went and continues to go wrong: instead of some bright eyed democrats, the power in Kiev fell into the lap of unhealthy alliance of nationalistic fanatics and greedy old oligarchs and politicians, the alliance that could not come up with anything better than malign, bully, and then try to repossess the Eastern Ukraine. For Kievan leaders, freedom, democracy, and Europe didn't mean what one expects it to mean, but rather freedom to plunder and abuse Donbass region, while embracing virulent nationalism, and revisionist history in which Ukraine's mythic achievements are interlaced with equally mythic victimhood in the hands of Russia. The tension between the regions only escalated after Crimea joined Russia. Anti-Russian hysteria that was supposed to split Ukraine from Russia, instead, has split Ukraine in two. One conjures up demons of nationalism at one's own peril.

What were the Kiev or its western backers thinking when Ukrainian army began to bomb and destroy Donbass, the area filled with Russian speakers and native Russians? The loss of Crimea, failed to serve as a rude awakening for the nation that continues to live in the fantasy land, in which one can do anything one wants in the backyard of a powerful nuclear state, including pushing it from the access to the Black Sea, joining the hostile military alliance, banning the language, humiliating and abusing the population of the same ethnicity as your neighbor, and deliberately invoking Nazi symbolism and proclaiming Nazi collaborators as heroes into the face of the country which lost 25 million of its citizens to Nazis. This utterly deranged flurry of activity, worthy of Bedlam inhabitants, was condoned if not cheered by the Western politicians and press. Instead, it was that very opponent, who urgently addressed its geopolitical and security concerns, who was unanimously declared to be living in a warped reality.

From a distance it all seems very strange – realistic and consistent behavior of Russians (they showered the same resolve in the war with Georgia in 2008) was dismissed as irrational, while those who embraced groundless expectations that culturally, ethnically, and politically diverse country torn apart by the virulent nationalism, would somehow metamorphose into a liberal and united Ukraine, have simply raised their decibel level. History tells us of law-abiding, civilized Germans turned into beasts as the result of their rampant nationalism, yet, Ukraine was somehow expected to undergo the transformation as the result of which its bacchanalia of Russophobia would result into instant Europeanization, while the murderous crowds capable only of lengthy and infantile reciting of nationalistic and anti-Russian slogans, burning its opponents in the buildings as they did in Odessa, and otherwise intimidating and humiliate them, would become Dutch or Germans. Apparently Chancellor Merkel, when she coined by now ubiquitous phrase that Putin inhabits a different reality, didn't really mean it. Merkel might have meant something different, but the phrase has clearly caught on. So maybe Madame Merkel should come out again and explain how does she spell "different reality": Bundestag, Poroshenko, NATO, EU, the State Department, or *NYT*?

In the absence of Merkel's clarifications, the game of "spotting Russian madness" spread like wildfire. While Anthony Lane of the *Washington Post* pontificated on Putin's "warped reality", Julia Joffe of *New Republic* went on from diagnosing Putin to suggesting that the whole Russians is deranged. Not to be outdone, other commentators began to observe Putin's symptoms in Russian press, and then Russian public. This delicious irony of madmen falling heads over heels in their attempts to detect signs of madness in sane people was obviously lost on the corporate media.

Would someone living, say, in China, has the nerve to tell people in RI about events in Massachusetts, and correct Rhode Islanders who work, shop, party, and eat in Massachusetts, that what they see unfolding there is wrong. And then accuse them for living in alternative universe. That's exactly what numerous Washington pundits did in the case of Russia? And why? Only because Soviet Russia has once been the center of propaganda? So Russians should never be trusted?

This thinking became so pervasive, that even the calls to face reality and prevent further Ukrainian destruction in the light of Russian resolve, are couched in the language of "irrationality." Ukraine should surrender to Putin's demands because "Mr. Putin is not rational" – and therefore can't be convinced by the economic sanctions, writes Ben Judah in the *NYT*.

The pervasiveness of these madness charges demonstrate the scope of anti-Russian campaign, mounted against the country that dared to interfere in the "rational" script that worked so well in Yugoslavia. Russia, of course, is dead certain not to replay the Yugoslavia scenario. Anyone with the eyes to see and ears to hear, could have detected it in both Russian behavior and the statements of their political leaders.

The question of self-induced blindness of the western handlers of the crisis is worth exploring further, utilizing "Benito Cereno," a short story written by an astute and sane observer of his country's fixations, Herman Melville. Andrew Delano, a bright-eyed and naïve captain of American frigate, sees another boat seemingly drifting in the sea. When he boards this boat with

the offer of help, he observes the signs of disrepair coupled with an ideal picture of racial harmony, Spanish sailors and black slaves – function in perfect unison. Only when leaving the ship, Delano notices a violent action directed at the Spanish captain of the ship. It occurs to him that what he's observed was a show; that reality behind it is by far more gruesome, that dead bodies are hidden by trampoline beyond which he refused to look. Melville's point here is not to justify or condemn the revolt, or the institution of slavery. Fundamental as these issues are, they lie beyond the scope of his scrutiny. What he depicts is the American refusal to recognize evil, especially when some positive alternative is offered. Look how harmonious are these groups, thinks Delano, failing to poke beyond the surface and register fear, violence, intimidation, and lies.

It is very likely that people who run State Department knew exactly what is going on in Ukraine. The press and the gullible public itself, however, acted exactly like Melville's Lieutenant. Traditional Russophobia shaped by the years of Cold War, played its role, but why such an urgent need to embrace all things Ukrainian? Only because the land that served the backbone of Soviet regime, and supplied it with such leaders as Khrushchev and Brezhnev, all of the sudden declared itself the victim of Russia? Be it as it may, modern day Delanos, refuse to recognize Nazi collaborators in newly glorified Nationalist heroes, refuse to see corrupt oligarchs and failed politicians in President Poroshenko and Prime Minister Yatseniuk, nor do they realize that the new a leader in Ukrainian Jewry is the notorious oligarch, Igor Kolomoisky, who now runs Dnepropetrovsk region – Brezhnev's former stronghold – as his own fiefdom.

The West also failed to recognize Russian anger and Russian resolve. Those who know Russia well, understand that Russia is both weak and strong, both poor and rich, both alienated and united. Furthermore, due to the endless amounts of misery and hardship that the country had endured, its population – when pushed to the wall by the sanctions, lecturing, bullying, and other forms of school-yard showmanship – can become very tough indeed. Being on the border with Ukraine, and defending its national interests, Russia has way too many tricks at its disposal and is willing to use them all, ranging from "little green men," to nuclear arms as President Putin has recently reminded his audience. Does the West really want to get engaged? Is it ready to start WWII, only because few paranoid Baltic or Polish politicians push them into this fight with the battle cry, "The Russians are coming," ridiculed by Hollywood already half a century ago? Washington bullies, these liberal interventionists, as John Mearsheimer called them, have clearly underestimated their opponent – a big mistake in any confrontation.

They also overestimated Ukrainian resolve. Ukrainian army was not really ready to fight in the East. Regular soldiers know that they act as an invading force, no matter what their politicians tell them. Of course Kiev has the air dominance and can continue to bomb but similar dominance didn't help US in Vietnam, nor did it help Russians in Afghanistan. The soldiers of these countries have to deal with the situation long time ago diagnosed by Leo Tolstoy, who in his *War and Peace* explains Russian army's failure in earlier, European wars against Napoleon (as opposed to their success against his invasion): "There was nothing to fight for." Well, it is clear that Vietnamese, Afghans, or Donbass "separatists" have plenty of reasons for which to fight.

So what do we have now as the result of these white lies, misguided ambitions, and miscalculations? – Thousands of killed and wounded, tens of thousands of refugees; Civil war

that refuses to die out. Ukrainian government that persists in its stubborn refusal to deal with the reality of losing war, failing economy, falling currency, and frustrated army which doesn't really know what it is doing in the eastern Ukraine.

It is clear, that Europe might complain about Macbeth-like tyrant Putin or let some of its unhinged politicians to declare that Ukraine is fighting on behalf of Europe but it is more than ready to back off, and let Ukrainian leaders to get their act together. It is a different matter for the US, however. Logical thing to do would be to emulate Europeans and tell Ukrainians to start rebuilding whatever is left of the country. But that would also mean that all those neocons and interventionists, who pushed US into this predicament would have to be discredited. But such an honorable and mature way of dealing with the situation is hardly to be expected. It is easier to argue for more action, for deeper involvement. If sanctions do not work, let's provide military help, if that doesn't work, let's send the army, or air force, or what have you. Letting Ukraine fail – the argument goes – will result in tremendous blow to US, to its prestige, it will weaken US standing as the one indispensable hegemon on the world stage. The very concepts of "prestige" and "standing" might be as old-fashion, as the sphere of influence, or country's backyard, but being a realist, I recognize their power over politicians' imagination. Will President Obama do the right thing and tell Poroshenko – who is supposed to be in the States in late September – what he has to do? I doubt it. The neocons, entrenched as they are in their alternative reality, rather than admitting their miscalculations, would prefer to push Obama into the military escalation with Russia, ignoring the fact, that it is theirs and not US prestige which is on the line. President Obama doesn't have a very good record of standing up to their pressure, and their fanatical rhetoric of American exceptionalism. Ukraine will be turned into Afghanistan, Ukrainian nationalists from the country's western regions would become new mujahedeen armed with Stringers, or new ISIS. These actions obviously would not go well with Russia, so the proxy war at the Ukrainian territory will continue. We might wait for the newly elected president, to remind us that what makes us powerful and exceptional is not denials or threats, but mature and democratic way of dealing with mistakes and miscalculations. Ukraine might be destroyed in the process, though.